

BEYOND THE PAST: PURSUING THE MISSION

—WOODIE J. STEVENS

Leaving the Jimma Prison AIDS Project in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, medical missionary Erica Rios journaled:

Today I cried, laughed, joked, encouraged, and received encouragement. Filled with mixed feelings, my heart broke as I held the little ones, children whose mothers were prisoners. The conditions were indescribable. The stifling odors gagged me; I could not breathe. I wanted to throw up, but my discomfort was nothing compared to that of the teens in the youth ward sleeping on the littered floor. I cannot imagine the discomfort of the condemned teens living in perpetual filth. They have no future, no hope, no love, no parents or home—nothing, except the AIDS prison.

Back in my hotel, a palace compared to where I had just been, I reflected. Those little ones absorbed our care, love, and compassion. They hungered for a drop of love—merely a caressing touch. They desperately needed so much more than I could give. I watched the Compassionate Ministries team bravely fight limitations. They provided all the support possible, but all our efforts seem so small. And yet, I know our God is great and is mindful of this suffering world.

A leader in Africa responded to my aching question, “How do we serve in areas of incalculable needs and paltry resources?”

He replied, “In Africa, you decide who is going to live and who is going to die. We cannot sustain all the kids. We are forced to prioritize. Yet we can still touch the lives of many with the love of God.”

Our efforts are just drops of water in the bucket. The needs of the world are so vast. But, as Mother Teresa said, without individual drops, the ocean would not exist.

Flying back to the United States, Erica prayed: *Lord, help my church to focus on your mission. Help me speak your love language. Help me see your bleeding heart, and capture your sense of destiny. Help my church move as the Body of Christ in mission, especially for the little ones.*

As a physician, Erica Rios has given her life to serving and helping others. She ministers to those in great pain, yet she was not prepared for the haunting words of the African leader, “In Africa, you decide who is going to live and who is going to die.”

For most of us, being forced to make that kind of decision would be overwhelming. Certainly Jesus is calling His church to be a worldwide compassionate army binding up the broken, healing the sick, clothing the naked, and feeding the hungry. Across the world, our church is doing everything it can to be the love of God in dark places where there is no love. We can and we must be about the global task of serving Christ by serving the needy in our world.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you may not be able to be a missionary to Ethiopia or any other part of the world, but you do have a mission field. It may be next door, across the street, or down the road—but it is a mission field. Your mission field is wherever God has placed you. You might be a long-term resident, or you may have a temporary address, but wherever you are, you have a mission.

The mission for followers of Jesus has significant implications for our daily lives. What if God has placed each of us where we are in order to be the love of Jesus to those around us? What if the people we en-

counter daily are God's mission field for us? What if you and I are actually deciding who is going to live and who is going to die—spiritually?

Is that what Jesus meant when He told Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19)?

The man behind the counter is a never-dying soul. We speak to him often. Are the words we say the words of life or death? Do we know if he is going to live or die eternally? Jesus told His disciples not to fear the one who can kill the body, but, instead, "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The new statement of mission for the Church of the Nazarene speaks directly to this incredible responsibility: to make Christlike disciples in the nations. What does that mean? How does that apply to you and me? What is so different about it? Are there hidden implications? Will it require anything new? Are there fresh ways of thinking? What are we supposed to do with a statement of mission? Isn't that what we have been doing?

A mission statement points to our reason for existence. It explains what we are attempting to do. It provides parameters for actions and priorities. It enables the church around the world to focus its energies on a common objective, uniting the army of Christ in pursuit of what Jesus told us to do. It is foundational.

The mission invites us to move beyond "You should go to church and Sunday School." Our mission is calling us beyond "Sit still and be saved." The Spirit is advancing us beyond "Listen to the lesson, hear the sermon, sing in the choir, and pay your tithe."

This mission opens the leadership door beyond the pastor and church board. This mission moves beyond Sunday School classrooms. This mission is an unleashing of the laity. It is an empowerment for every member of the Church of the Nazarene to become what Jesus told us to become. It calls all of us to active participation in the common mission. God is calling His church beyond Sunday to every day.

What Has Changed? Who Has to Adapt?

Making disciples is nothing new. It is not as if we have not been making disciples—almost every church does some discipling in some way. When a pastor reads the text or a Sunday School teacher opens the Bible, some ingredients of discipleship are provided. The command to make disciples is nothing new. In fact, making disciples is exactly what we have been pursuing.

The foundation of our mission is not new. We have always been a holiness church, a holiness church with a mission. The Holy Spirit continues propelling us forward in pursuit of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. For the last 100 years, Nazarenes have been making disciples in the nations. The fact that you are reading this speaks to the reality that somehow or somehow, someone influenced you to follow Christ. We give thanks to God for the advance our church has seen in these last 100 years as we rapidly approach 2 million members worldwide. We rejoice in how far we have come since Pilot Point, and we celebrate what God has done through those who have gone before. Because of God, we have been doing a lot of right things in the right way and in the right time. All thanks and glory belongs to Him.

However, we no longer live in the 20th century. It is no longer 1908. One hundred years of incredible change force the question, “And now where?”—Where do we go from here? What is different from what we have always been doing? Discipleship principles have always existed, but what methods need to be adapted?

Remember opening exercises? Those were the days when Sunday School attendance far exceeded morning worship attendance. Dear Sister Evelyn would pray, “Lord, bless the after-service.” The after-service? She was praying about morning worship. The big question after Sunday School was, “Are you staying for church?”

Did you know we did not report how many attended morning worship until 1972? Prior to that time, we only counted membership

and Sunday School. We cannot go back in our denominational records and tell you what your church's average Sunday morning worship attendance was in 1965, but we can tell you the number of members and the average Sunday School attendance. Those were the growth numbers. It was the faithful that stayed for morning worship and the sermon.

In those days, folks were in church every time the doors were open. Do you know why? Because those were the *only* doors open. That was before 24-hour-a-day Wal-Mart, before 7-11s. That was when the shops closed at five o'clock, and the streets rolled up each night at 6 P.M., except on Thursdays when they stayed open until 9 P.M.

Societal conformity required church membership for standing as a solid citizen in the community. The first thing on your résumé was, "I am a member of First Church."

Do you remember perfect attendance pins? In those days, the average regular attendee only missed three Sundays a year. But that was before interstates, three-day weekends, and shopping malls. Public television had three stations. Now, the regular attendee misses church 13 Sundays a year. I tell pastors, "Hey, if they show up half the time, rejoice, and consider them regular members."

I won my first airplane ride in a two-seater Piper Cub through a Sunday School contest between the Reds and the Blues. We had 17 kids crammed into that 1957 "Betsy Blue" Ford station wagon. Today, my folks would be arrested.

The question is, what has changed and who has to adapt?

The Great Commission

To make Christlike disciples in the nations means deploying the army of Nazarenes to every corner of the globe. It means getting more troops on the ground, engaging their world with the claims of Jesus Christ. It means moving beyond Sunday faithful attendance and service to everyday discipleship. It means that all over the world,

every Nazarene has one primary assignment: to be and make Christ-like disciples.

The Great Commission defines our task. Jesus gave this assignment shortly before returning to the Father. Eugene Peterson expresses Jesus' instructions:

Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life. . . . Instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day, right up to the end of the age (*Matt. 28:19-20, TM*).

William Barclay, renowned Scottish theologian, translates the charge like this:

You must therefore go and make the people of all nations my disciples. You must baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and you must teach them to obey all the commands I have given you. And there is not a day when I will not be with you to the end of time (*Matt. 28:19-20*).

The words are direct and personal. Jesus is not speaking to the pastor or a Sunday School teacher. He is not addressing congregational leaders or denominational officials. He is speaking directly to His followers. If you are following Jesus, then through the living Word of God and the empowering Holy Spirit, you have a personal mandate. The task is assigned every Christian; it is for everyone who follows Jesus.

In John 21, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Then Peter saw John and replied, "Lord, what about him?"

"What is that to you?" Jesus asked, "You must follow me" (John 21:19-22). Jesus did not allow Peter an option.

If we are going to follow Jesus, we must obey Him; there is no alternative. Obedience in the life of a disciple is not subject to our personal preferences. Yet it seems as if we have been doing everything else *but* making disciples. We have been going to church. We have even faithful-

ly gone to Sunday School and paid our tithe. But the mission goes beyond that—it goes beyond Sunday to making disciples every day.

For how long?

Until the end of the age.

Do you think we have church members who do not follow Jesus? Are there Christians who do not pray, read, or hear the Scriptures? Do we have members who do not witness or serve or give? Is it possible we have disciple-less Christians? Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.

I'm reluctant to write this, but there is no such thing as a casual Christian. Those who are "Christ-ins" cannot be casual about following Jesus. For instance, someone might say, "I believe in Jesus, but I do not necessarily follow Him." The problem with that approach is that even the demons believe in Jesus (James 2:19).

Much of our modern evangelism seems to teach that a Christian is someone who believes in Jesus by faith, receives the gift of eternal life, is forgiven all his or her sins, and goes to heaven at death.

Wow! What a good deal for me! Slam-Dunk! I am saved.

On the other hand, many think a disciple, is a *really good* Christian. They pray, study their Bibles, and witness to their neighbors. They go to church on Sunday and even take classes on how to be a fruitful Christian.

Yet there is no such thing as casually following Jesus. You and I are either obediently doing what He told us to do, or we are living in blatant disobedience. Jesus always insists His followers obey Him.

A self-absorbed, narcissistic culture looks for the easiest path for the maximum benefit. We tend to avoid anything that requires discipline and obedience. Please understand there is no biblical distinction between a Christian and a disciple. There are not two levels of following Jesus. Either we are learning from and following in obedient fellowship with the Master, or we are ignoring and resisting the clear instructions of Jesus.

The statement of mission may be a call for many to repent of following Jesus at a distance. It may become a great opportunity for us to experience renewal and a fresh anointing from God's Holy Spirit.